



March 24, 2009

Local leaders say Coast shortchanged by funding

GULFPORT — Leaders in the cities of Waveland, Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, Long Beach and Gulfport joined forces today to express concerns over President Obama's stimulus plan and how money for "shovel ready" transportation projects will be spent.

Most of Mississippi's 82 counties will receive millions for significant upgrades to transportation infrastructure, but Hancock and Harrison counties—the two U.S. counties which received the brunt of Hurricane Katrina—have been left out of billions of dollars in **discretionary funding** from the Mississippi Department of Transportation.

Today, local leaders are feeling shortchanged because of a mandate in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which says much of the money must be spent in economically distressed areas, or where the projects would maximize job creation.

Under those standards, Hancock and Harrison counties **are not "economically distressed" enough** to warrant additional money from the president's stimulus package.

"How bad does it have to be before you qualify as distressed? My God," said **Long Beach Mayor Billy Skellie**.

MDOT is required by federal law to follow the economically distressed criteria in the ARRA. The determination of whether a community is economically distressed is based on conditions as of the 2000 census.

"Are we economically distressed?" said **Gulfport Mayor Brent Warr**. "Well, we were hurting economically before the storm, then we are hit with the worst natural disaster in our nation's history, and then, as we are trying to recover from the storm, our people are hit with the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. If that's not distressed, I'm not sure I know what is."

Local leaders say the idea of not being economically distressed enough to receive funding is laughable. Harrison County's median family income is about \$10,000 less than the national average, and Hancock County's median family income is nearly

\$15,000 less than the average American family, according to the most recent census data.

As part of the president's stimulus plan \$150 billion will be invested in new infrastructure, the largest increase in funding of our nation's roads, bridges, and mass transit systems since the creation of the national highway system in the 1950s, according to recovery.gov.

What we need

Coast leaders are asking Congress to waive the economically distressed mandate, or at least offer Hancock and Harrison counties an exception based on Hurricane Katrina and the impact that a global recession has had on storm recovery.

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*The City of Gulfport • Office of Public Information • rlafontaine@gulfport-ms.gov • Phone:
228-868-5782 • P.O. Box 1780 Gulfport, MS 39502-1780 • FAX: 868-5800*